



## Missing Hiker on Marion Mountain Trail

**August 10, 2008**  
**San Jacinto Wilderness**  
**2008-025**

By William Carlson

Don't jinx yourself, I had been thinking seconds before the pager went off. I had taken note of the perfect weather, a busy weekend, and a lack of rescue call outs to piece together the coming events of this night. Sure enough, 8:30 p.m. brought word of a hiker last seen on the San Jacinto summit who had contacted his friend stating that he was lost.

Lee Arnson and I headed up the trail as Team One. With the information we received we were sure we could find the missing hiker in a couple of hours. Our first decision was to search the Marion Mountain Trail as this was the trail the missing hiker planned to use. Setting out at brisk pace, we promptly remembered the torture required to quickly hike this steep trail with overnight packs. After calling out for what seemed like eternity we reached the Deer Springs Trail Junction, still with no luck. Our thoughts of a quick find were slipping away into the night.

Knowing the subject was in a clearing gave us continued hope that we would find the subject before reaching the summit. We called out often, taking care to make multiple attempts just up the trail from our last call. We wanted to be sure the missing hiker could hear us and that we didn't walk past him. Our callouts were double edge swords of sorts. As seasoned searchers we knew that we could hear a response at any moment. However, we also knew the frustration of not hearing anything. We continued up the trail, shouting up and down each canyon and ridge, with no sign still of the missing hiker.

We reached Little Round Valley and checked the outhouse to no avail. Suddenly a voice! "Who are you looking for?" Not exactly the voice we were hoping to hear at one in the morning. We had located a couple camping in Little Round Valley and advised them of our missing hiker. They said they would keep an eye out for him. Continuing up the trail we were down to a small amount of hope. We knew we wanted to find him tonight so we kept telling ourselves that the missing hiker was in the summit hut, a rock building with bunk beds, sleeping bags, and other equipment to be used in an emergency. We reached the saddle between the east and west slopes of San Jacinto and gave another unsuccessful callout toward the Palm Springs Tramway.

It was 2:15 a.m. when we reached the summit hut. I held my breath as Lee opened the

door. A shockwave of frustration hit me like a gust of wind. Lee and I both knew the situation was not looking good but neither of us wanted to say it. We dropped our packs and headed to the summit to make some final callouts before we turned in for a couple hours of sleep. From the summit we were able to call out in all directions. Still, the only sound was the whisper of the still air of the San Jacinto Wilderness. Frustrated, tired, and hungry, Lee and I returned to the hut. After making some cell phone calls to order more teams and a helicopter for the morning, we made a quick batch of hot oatmeal and curled up to try and get some sleep.

Surprisingly, sleep didn't come easy at 3 a.m. Thoughts on where to look riddled our minds. Knowing that the subject's cell phone had been handled by a tower in Hemet told us he should be on the west side of the mountain. However, many years of Search and Rescue experience also told us that he could easily have made it over to the east side of the mountain. Then after finally dozing off we received a call from an RSO deputy stating the helicopter would be up in the morning. Between 5 and 6 a.m. brought the best sleep. However, the first rays of sun creeping through the window shortly reminded us that there was work to be done.

After a quick breakfast of oatmeal, coffee, and red vines, we headed to the summit to call out again. Our Riverside County Sheriff's Aviation helicopter joined us in the skies above San Jacinto peak even as many team members were arriving at base. A quick radio discussion sent the helicopter to search the east side of the mountain.

With daylight on our side we knew we had a good chance of finding the missing hiker before sunset. Jim Bakos arrived and took over the communications and logistics side of the search. Lee and I took charge of field operations and quickly passed along assignments for incoming teams. Shortly thereafter, Jim and Grace Manues headed up, searching the Seven Pines Trail. Nick Nixon, Jeri Sanchez, and Brenda Deluna began searching the Fuller Ridge Trail. These two trails have successfully been used many times in the past to locate hikers missing from the summit.

Feeling confident with the teams that were in the field and en route to the search, Lee and I continued our assignment heading to Jean Peak and across to Marion Mountain. You never really know how hard you work in Search and Rescue until you search all night and start up again in the morning. We were not slow, but there was definitely no spring in our step. Near the summit of Jean we located a single set of tracks that appeared to be somewhat fresh. We were not totally excited, yet we did not count them out. Continuing along we would occasionally locate the tracks again and then quickly lose them among the pine needles.

The process of calling out was again becoming frustrating. We had now covered a good portion of the upper mountain with no response. The only hope we had going for us was the single set of tracks heading out across the ridge. (Note: the main reason we were not too excited about the tracks was the fact that many locals hike this route daily). We reached a flat area just below Marion Mountain and again called out with no response. However, we found a sandy area which again yielded the single set of

tracks. This time, however, the tracks wandered around a bit. Often times during searches certain clues tell you that you are on the right track. This was one such clue. We followed the tracks for about thirty seconds before deciding to give a callout. As we glanced up before giving a yell, the missing hiker said hello” from about 300 feet away. We were astounded.

A brief conversation confirmed that this was indeed the missing hiker. He was in great condition for having been out all night. Apparently he had been able to crawl under a rock and sleep most of the night. We made contact with the helicopter and arranged to have the subject picked up from a boulder a couple hundred yards from our location. Pilot Tony Bowen and TFO Chad Marlatt brought the helicopter in and together we performed a textbook hover-step pickoff. Our missing hiker was then flown the Keenwild Heliport to meet up with his friends. Tony and Chad returned a few minutes later to perform the same operation. In a matter of minutes we were all back to base discussing another successful mission for RMRU.

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.